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### TEN QUICK TIPS FOR WORKING WITH EDUCATION ABROAD PROVIDER ORGANIZATIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

Due to the proliferation of provider organizations working in the broadly-defined "industry" of U.S. education abroad, it has become increasingly challenging for even the most experienced education abroad professional to differentiate organizations and to determine with whom to partner. Long-standing affiliations and professional loyalties are being tested by the arrival of a new cadre of innovative and entrepreneurial organizations and without doubt competition for students and attention is intensifying. As a result, education abroad offices are being bombarded with email solicitations, campus visit requests, ever-expanding exhibition halls, and so on. What follows, in no particular order, are a few quick tips for education abroad professionals that are hopefully timely, reasonable and worthy of consideration.

## TEN QUICK TIPS FOR WORKING WITH EDUCATION ABROAD PROVIDER ORGANIZATIONS

### 1. Re-think the term "third party provider"

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The term "third-party provider" has been a long-standing term commonly used to refer to education abroad provider organizations, but the term is misleading. The term implies that all provider organizations act as third-party agents neatly positioned between sending and receiving institutions. While many provider organizations facilitate direct enrollment, others provide all of their own academic programming and thus do not serve in any third-party capacity. Choose a term that works consistently in your program portfolio and stick with it. Some institutions have recently chosen to use the term "partner" to strategically convey to students and faculty members that their institutions are working with reputable organizations.

### 2. Find a match between your goals and their capacity

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When deciding whether to partner with a particular provider organization, it is important to determine how the organization will help further your institution's education abroad goals. Few provider organizations are able to commit the time and effort necessary to deeply understand the goals and strategic directions of each of their sending institutions and to align their services to support them. Perhaps also, many colleges and universities fail to take the time to share their goals with providers! If a potential provider organization appears more focused on short-term recruitment and less on helping realize your goals, move on. Remember your job is not to send the organization students, but to facilitate and



enhance education abroad programming at your institution. If the organization is ready to help you with that, press ahead. Ask questions. How will their curricular offerings complement your portfolio? Do they offer scholarships targeting particular populations? How will their efforts bolster your promotion and outreach initiatives? How do they use technology and what are their enrollment management strategies? How will they enhance your curriculum integration efforts?

### **3. Shift focus from where students want to study to what they study**

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We know that education abroad is not merely about getting students on planes and that our jobs are not concerned with travel and tourism. As education abroad offices transition from location-based advising to discipline-specific advising, the identification of study abroad options has shifted to become more about complementing what students are studying on our campuses or supplementing students' education with coursework and experiences not available to them at home. If the provider organization does not utilize language consistent with higher education and if their campus representatives cannot communicate effectively with your faculty, beware. If the organization still uses language of "trips" and "travel," it is probably not the best provider for advancing your curriculum integrations goals.

### **4. Establish a vetting mechanism**

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When researching education abroad options, students quickly realize that not all provider organizations offer comparable programming. Some are inexpensive but offer only direct enrollment options with limited student support. Others are more expensive, but offer a wide range of services and activities. In much the same way, education abroad professionals understand that providers vary, so a review mechanism or rubric is needed to vet them. Some have used the standard four-quadrant Johari window with "institutional alignment" and "student interest" serving as the X and Y axes, while others have assessed providers using a normative bell curve based on such dimensions as program value; health, safety and security protocols; faculty engagement and support; program quality; ease of credit transfer; and alignment with the Forum on Education Abroad's Standards of Good Practice and Code of Ethics. Ask for references. Engage your faculty. Whatever approach taken, ensure that the approach is consistent and transparent, well-understood, and aligned with your institutional goals. Use it to create a strategically balanced portfolio and to determine when to stop working with particular providers.



## 5. Request to see results

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In this current era of increasing standardization, accountability and demand for transparency, it has become even more important that international educators be able to produce empirical evidence, often on demand, that reinforces the value of international education and demonstrates how our efforts enhance and extend institutional missions, values, and priorities. Provider organizations must support our offices by moving away from making empty claims and false promises that their students realize gains in intercultural competency and language proficiency, for example, without providing evidence to support these claims. While most providers can readily provide student satisfaction surveys, fewer offer assessment reports on student learning. Ask provider organizations to present evidence that their programs are in fact delivering on stated promises. Similarly, do not hesitate to request other reports, including information on scholarship funding, enrollment of underrepresented students, etc. The information provided will most certainly help you with fulfilling your reporting responsibilities to senior leadership and accrediting bodies, not to mention helping to ensure that your students are learning.

## 6. Ask about the organization's mission, values, and priorities

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Be sure you know why you want to work with this particular organization and be prepared to succinctly describe the organization to your faculty and senior administration. This isn't always easy to do. When asked to describe themselves and what makes them unique, most provider organizations reply in terms of their historical significance, portfolio of program offerings, advising services, scholarship amounts, or excellent on-site staff. But what makes one organization different from another? If the organization does not concisely convey its mission or successfully differentiate itself from others, how will you be able to do so?

## 7. Assess your organization's comfort level with various types of provider organizations

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International educational mobility has a long history in U.S. higher education, but it was not until shortly after WWII that inter-institutional consortia began to emerge. In recent decades, there has been a proliferation of for-profit and non-profit provider organizations that offer education abroad program services to U.S. students. Some of the most affordable providers are for-profit and some of the most expensive are non-profit, and vice versa. Be sure to know where your institution stands with regard to working with providers across the various sectors.



## **8. Investigate where the provider has been and consider where it is going**

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In addition to assessing a provider's history, reputation and credibility, it is important to understand where it is and where it is headed. If the most rapidly growing mode of mobility on your campus is faculty-directed programming, for example, then it would be wise to assess whether the provider's programs will complement your overall portfolio and perhaps even bolster faculty-directed program development on your campus, through customized programming, integrated teaching models, and/or other pedagogical and structural innovations. Is the provider headed in a direction that promises new innovation that you can leverage and harness? Can it help advance curriculum integration efforts and faculty engagement at your institution? Keep in mind that education abroad professionals have long turned to provider organizations for creativity, innovation and originality, and provider organizations have looked to universities and colleges for guidance, direction, and leadership.

## **9. Insist they respect your systems, structures, and protocols**

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It is important to carefully orient provider organizations to your institution and its internationalization goals and strategic directions. Be specific and clear about what you expect from them and what boundaries exist. For example, when meeting with potential students, many providers prefer to direct applicants to their organization's website rather than to yours. This might present complications for your tracking, monitoring and follow-up. Is it permissible to contact faculty members directly? Can campus visits be arranged independently? How do you want to be informed of health and safety emergencies? If the provider organization has committed to working with you, then it has an obligation to understand and align its activities with your systems, structures, and protocols. Expect nothing less.

## **10. Discuss how they will advance your promotion and outreach efforts**

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Most provider organizations have a team of campus representatives who are assigned geographic territories for recruitment and marketing purposes. These representatives typically make periodic visits to institutions in their recruiting areas. Many education abroad offices have felt obliged to welcome these campus visits even when the purposes or goals are unstated, rather than to insist that such visits be scheduled at a time when the visits reinforce the office's promotion and outreach efforts. At the same time, campus visits can be quite expensive for the provider. Work together to schedule visits when they make the most sense. For many campus representatives, recruiting students is the primary



objective. This means the organizations may look to recruit where it has historically made most sense, namely among students studying the humanities and social sciences. Determine if the provider is genuinely committed to sustained outreach initiatives targeting all students, not just those already well-represented in education abroad.

*For additional reading on provider organizations, please see Heyl's 2011 AIEA Occasional Paper: "Third-Party Program Providers and Education Abroad: Partner or Competitor?"*

*[\[http://www.aieaworld.org/occasional-papers/\]](http://www.aieaworld.org/occasional-papers/)*



The **Association of International Education Administrators** (AIEA), a membership organization formed in November 1982, is composed of institutional leaders engaged in advancing the international dimensions of higher education. The purposes of the Association are to:

- Provide an effective voice on significant issues within international education at all levels,
- Improve and promote international education programming and administration within institutions of higher education,
- Establish and maintain a professional network among international education institutional leaders,
- Cooperate in appropriate ways with other national and international groups having similar interests.

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